



WSD **Personnel**  
Washington State  
**Employee  
Assistance  
Program**

# FrontLine Supervisor

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A newsletter from the Employee Assistance Program

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<http://www.dop.wa.gov/eap>

■ **What does the phrase “assertive supervision” mean with regard to the role supervisors play in managing troubled employees?**

**Demonstrating “assertive supervision”** toward a troubled employee describes detachment or “stepping away” from feelings or emotions that cause you to enable conduct and performance problems. You are then free to act in a way that allows the employee to experience accountability or consequences for problematic on-the-job performance or conduct. Assertive supervision reflects a change in behavior of the enabler. Detachment isn’t easy. Close relationships between people, whether employees, friends, or family members, include a natural and healthy drive to protect and support. This dynamic, however, can contribute to the person’s problems if solving them requires tough decisions the enabled person would rather avoid. Assertive supervision makes the need for change in relationships nonnegotiable.

■ **My employee told me he received a DUI. He said he was sorry and embarrassed. He admitted to drinking too much and said he was going to voluntarily get help. This is a good sign, right? Doesn’t it indicate that treatment is more likely to be successful?**

**Assuming alcoholism exists**, the cooperation you’ve seen is a good thing, but the rigors of recovery from addiction are challenging. Successful treatment depends on the patient’s attitude toward education while in treatment plus the willingness to change and practice behaviors that will support recovery. The degree to which family, friends and even the workplace support an effective recovery program is also critical. Practicing alcoholics often mistakenly believe that willpower is the key factor in staying sober and may experience relief or even excitement over a renewed sense of determination prompted by an adverse event such as a DUI. The person’s belief that he or she can “do it this time for sure” may appear as sudden insight and enlightenment. This enthusiasm is no match for the illness without a rigorous treatment program plus the acceptance that recovery is a lifelong process.

■ **What is presenteeism and why has it become such a popular term in the workplace?**

**Presenteeism describes** the phenomenon of coming to work while physically or emotionally ill only to experience a reduction in effectiveness and productivity. Coming to work with a common cold and being unable to perform at par is a simple example. Another example is working while experiencing burnout or after a traumatic event. The concern over presenteeism increases during economic recessions because fear of

job loss may push employees to come to work when they otherwise would stay home. There are many indirect consequences of presenteeism. They include lost productivity, passing the illness to others, increased absenteeism, morale problems, and coworker conflicts. Not feeling well enough to work but still coming to work costs employers billions of dollars each year. Talk to your EAP about presenteeism issues, how they may affect your work group, and what you can do about it.

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■ **An employee complained of being punched in the arm by a coworker. The “puncher” said it was “in jest,” and that no violent intent was meant. My own kids do this sort of thing. There is a bruise, but some people bruise easily. Is this an EAP matter? Or should I dismiss this?**

**Violence at work is** not defined by what the perpetrator had in mind. The violent act occurred, the coworker was struck, and harm ensued. Just as important, you have been notified, and a complaint has been brought. If you dismiss this incident, it could be established that you responded to it with negligence and apathy. If a similar incident, or something worse, were to occur in the future, how you responded to this incident could be held against you. This incident may appear to you as innocent horseplay or roughhousing, but it is inappropriate workplace behavior that should be addressed. Investigate properly, refer the perpetrator to the EAP, document how you responded, consult with management, and treat the complaint with seriousness and resolve. For helpful information when dealing with issues of workplace violence, check out the WA State EAP *Guide to Workplace Violence Prevention and Response*.

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■ **We had an employee who was dismissed for ongoing performance issues. The employee then accused the supervisor of sexual harassment. The harassment charges had not been mentioned previously. Is this proof of retaliation? Could the EAP have talked the employee out of the accusation?**

**The timing** of the charges is not unusual for employees who have suffered Sexual harassment during their employment. Retaliation is usually not the motive. Even with a policy against sexual harassment that encourages employees to come forward and assures protection, an environment that does not feel safe may impede the voicing of complaints. Once terminated, the employee no longer feels constrained, and it is easier to lodge the complaint. Until then, an employee may feel some subtle punishment could ensue if a complaint was made, or that management wouldn't take a complaint seriously. Victims of sexual harassment may not want to “rock the boat.” They may fear being seen as provocative or partly to blame. The thought of providing an accurate account of the sexual harassment history can also feel daunting. EAP support is always a good idea for employees facing a crisis, but the EAP is not a “fire wall” after the fact. The workplace's best intervention is prevention through education and zero tolerance for harassment.

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#### **NOTE from the EAP to Supervisors and Managers:**

Washington State is facing tough economic times, including employee layoffs. This can be a very stressful process, and supervisors are often asked difficult questions by their employees. The WA State Department of Personnel has gathered together helpful resources and information about layoffs in one convenient location. These are available at:

<http://www.dop.wa.gov/Managers/Layoff/default.htm>

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